

Christmas 2C, 2009

Text: Luke 2:22-40

Title: Kids and Church

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It's hard work bringing children to church.

First there's the challenge of getting everyone up and dressed and to church on time. And once you finally get everyone into church it's a struggle. When they're young, the challenge is getting them to sit still and pay attention and be quiet in church. Kids are loud and messy and want to do things their way.

As kids get older, the challenge is not so much keeping them quiet in church, but getting them to participate in church- to listen to the readings and to sing the songs and to feel like they're part of the service. You can still force older kids to come to church, but you can't force them to like it.

Finally, when your kids become teenagers and young adults, you often have a hard time getting them to come at all. Teenagers like to exercise their freedom, and church can be a place where things come to a head. "I don't want to go," "It's boring," "None of my friends have to go," "We went last week," "I need to sleep in."

Sometimes, once kids get confirmed, the parents just give up. There's too much competition from sports and scouts and social events that eventually parents just stop trying to get their kids to come to church. They figure they'll come back to church when it's time to get married or to have their kids baptized or start with Sunday school.

It's the rare teenager or young adult who enjoys coming to church and Bible Class. There are some out there, but they're few and far between.

Jesus was one of them. Jesus' parents didn't have any problems getting Jesus to go to church. Not only that, Jesus stayed for Bible Class- three days worth.

Jesus' parents didn't have a problem getting Jesus to come to church. Jesus' parents had trouble getting Jesus to leave church and go home with them.

Wouldn't it be great if we had that problem? Wouldn't it be great if we had a hard time getting young people to leave church, if they were so interested and intent on asking questions and talking about God that they didn't want to leave?

So how do we get there? How do we get not just young people, but people of all ages so interested in church and Bible Study that they don't want to leave?

Let's begin with another look at our story, and then go from there.

Jesus and His parents were in Jerusalem for the Passover - just like they do every year. Our text says that it was their custom.

Note the importance of custom and habit. At Passover you go to Jerusalem- every year, it's just what you do.

On Sunday morning you go to church. It's what you do. It's your custom. It's your habit. It's not strange or different or unusual. Even if you're on vacation, you find a church. If you're in the middle of nowhere, you've still got your Bible and you can read and pray. Sunday is the Lord's Day, so that means spending it listening to the Lord and speaking back to Him.

The problem comes when church is not a customary, regular, part of your every day life, but only something for special occasions. We'll go to church as long as we don't have anything else going on- a soccer game to go to, or a baby shower or some sleep to get caught up on. Then Sunday morning becomes something to do as long as nothing more important comes up. This makes it easier and easier to find excuses until you stop bothering with excuses and stop coming altogether. But if Sunday morning means the Lord, and nothing is ever allowed to take His place, then it's harder to let other things creep in.

Now, I know I'm preaching to the choir here. You know this because you're here week after week. But you may know people who aren't. They may come for holidays and special occasions, and a few other times during the year, but most of the time they aren't here. The best thing you can do for them is to encourage them to make church a regular part of their week. Make it a custom, a habit. Challenge them to go three weeks in a row. And then go from there.

There's a rhythm and a pattern to worship. It takes practice. When you miss a couple of weeks, it's easy to get out of step with the dance. But if you're here week in and week out, it become just part of who you are and what you do.

Now back to the Holy Family in the Holy City.

Everything went according to plan, until it was time to go home. Jesus was twelve, practically a teenager. His parents were used to giving Him a little more freedom and responsibility. They weren't concerned when He wasn't at their side the whole time. But after a full day of not seeing Him, they start to get a little concerned. After checking with the rest of the group and not finding Him, they get more worried. After three days of searching the streets of Jerusalem, they must have been panicked. Finally, they find Jesus in the temple listening to the teachers and asking questions.

To make sure that their Son understands what He has put them through, Mary says, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress."

How many of you have ever said this to your children, as they try to sneak in after curfew and when you smell alcohol or tobacco on their breath? "Do you know what you've put us through? Do you know how worried we've been?"

Mary tries to make Jesus feel guilty. But it doesn't work.

Using guilt as motivation does work some times. You can even guilt people into coming to church. "Look at everything Jesus did for you. He gave His life for you. He hung upon the cross for you. And you can't even give up one hour a week to say thank you?" Or, "Do you know how embarrassed we are when you don't come to church with us?" It's easy to use guilt as motivation.

And some times people need to hear the law, that they're breaking the third commandment by not gladly coming to hear God's word. They need to be called to repentance.

But after the law comes the gospel. The gospel is what motivates us to live a life pleasing to God.

Listen to how Jesus responds to His mother.

But Jesus responds simply. First He asks a question. "Why were you looking for me? In other words, "You should have known better. You know me. You remember who I am, don't you? What took you so long?"

Only Jesus can get away with talking to His parents like this. But He's right, of course. Mary and Joseph shouldn't have needed three days to find Jesus. They should have been able to find Him on the first try.

Jesus said, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

But His answer reveals why He is where He is, and why He's doing what He's doing. Mary says, "You should have been with your family." Jesus says that He's with His real family- in His Father's house, among His Father's things.

Jesus' answer reminds Mary of who He really is. He's not just her son, He's also the Son of His heavenly Father. This is His dad's house, and Jesus wants to spend time with Him here. His real home is not up in Nazareth, but it's here at the temple.

Jesus' answer also helps us with our issue of people coming or not coming to church.

This is your house. This is your real home. God is your Father, too. You were adopted in Holy Baptism, and so this is your Father's house.

We often think that this is the pastor's place, or maybe the altar guild's, or the elders', and that it's someone else's home, and we're just visiting.

The truth is, this is your house. Whether you've been a member here fifty years or fifty days, it's your house.

And that, I believe, is one of the keys to getting folks here and excited about staying. When you come to church, it's like a homecoming.

There's a difference between being at home and being a guest in a stranger's house.

When I was in college, the musical group I was in, the Wind Symphony, toured the country several times. Most evenings we stayed with host families. They were all very nice and polite. But it wasn't like being home. You were in a strange and a strange bed. You didn't know where things were. Even if your host told you to "make yourself at home" you never were. You weren't comfortable getting up in the middle of the night and rummaging through the refrigerator for a snack. You weren't comfortable picking up the remote and just flipping through the channels.

And you didn't know the people. You weren't comfortable just relaxing and being yourself, but you had to be polite and proper.

When you're at home, with your family, you don't have to worry about all these things.

And this is the way it should be here. This is your home, this your family. These are your traditions. These are your songs. You should be comfortable and relaxed here. You should feel at home.

When the church is someplace foreign and alien, it can be strange and scary and intimidating. The longer you've been away, the harder it is to come home.

Our challenge is to invite people to come home. And that involves reminding people who they are, and what this place is.

This is our Father's House. God, our Father, invites us here, to have a chat and a meal with the rest of the family. The most difficult part shouldn't be coming here, it should be leaving. It should break your heart every time you leave, and you should be counting the days until you can come back.

You are the daughters and sons of God the Father. Jesus is here, along with all your brothers and sisters. Even those who have died are here, too. Here you are home. It's a great place to be. Who would ever want to leave?

So when your kids or grandkids ask, "Why do we have to go to church?" You might respond something like this: "We are God's children, so we are going to our Father's house to see Him. We are going to listen and learn and ask questions, just like Jesus. We are going to be with our whole family, to celebrate and give thanks for everything we have."